

A JEWISH HISTORY OF PURDUE 1920-1940

Jules Janick

Purdue University

Prepared for Jewish Studies, November 28, 1990

One of the curious facts about Indiana is that it is a true mirror of the nation. Multiply almost any Indiana statistic by 50 and you obtain the U.S. total. For example, our population of 5 million x 50 = 250 million and 1,000 yearly deaths in Indiana due to automobile accidents x 50 = 50,000, the United States total.

Thus, Purdue's history, much less Jewish history, is not a unique episode but mirrors the nation's experience. At present, Jewish faculty is scattered over various departments, especially prominent in science, mathematics, and the humanities, beyond what would be expected based on population. This situation is found throughout academia. Precise data are unavailable for Purdue and beset with difficulty on whom to count: Who is a Jew? An informal count by school, using a Jewish staff member as census taker for each department, reveals the following statistics:

Agriculture	2.3%
Engineering	7.2%
Education	7.9%
Management	10.5%
Liberal Arts	19.8%
Science	22.2%

The average of the above is 12.5% (171/1366). I estimate the total is $200/2100 = 9.5\%$. The Jewish population of the U.S. is less than 3%.

There are other qualitative measures of the presence of Jews at Purdue. In 1990, the four largest departments in the School of Science were chaired by Jews. Purdue's Nobel laureate is Jewish. Two of Purdue's recent vice-presidents have been Jews. I know of no evidence in recent years of any institutional anti-Semitism at Purdue. There is a Jewish Studies program and a Hillel Foundation. Other good news: In the 1950s, Purdue had a Jewish quarterback, Froncie Gutman, who scored a touchdown and beat Notre Dame. The bad news: It was on Yom Kippur.

One could argue that being Jewish is a matter of choice, and counting who is and who isn't can be, by its nature, an invasion of privacy, parochial, even racist or gestapo-like. To many Jews, their heritage is a rich part of their culture and belief and is an essential fact that determines who they are. To others, it is confining, an impediment, an accident of birth, and a return to a past that they wish, for their own reasons, to leave behind. One recoils from probing into such a personal area, often one of anxiety and pain. But the fact is that even at the end of the 20th century, Jewishness is something that is hard to escape from because the world refuses to think of it as a matter of choice but rather as an irrevocable condition of birth, no matter how fervent the denial or how passionate the conversion. This is underscored in the Jewish history of Purdue. It is a history of some remarkable men who participated in changing Purdue from a small college to a major research university. It is also a sad story – of bigoted administrators, frightened people, and missed opportunities.

The Jewish history of Purdue has a dark side. Indiana, after all, was the home of the Ku Klux Klan. Purdue, in its earlier years, represented a small, struggling land grant college that reflected the mores of its time and community. From its founding in 1869 to 1920, as far as I can ascertain, there were no Jewish faculty members although there were Jewish students. The first Jewish fraternity, Sigma Alpha Mu, was formed in 1922, and the second, Tau Epsilon Phi, in the early 1930s. In contrast, Lafayette, from its inception, had a small but vibrant Jewish community – Temple Israel was founded in 1849 and Sons of Abraham about 1903. In 1990, there were four Rabbis in the community.

The Jewish history of Purdue can be conveniently divided into the following periods:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1869-1920 | The first 50 years at Purdue without any Jews on the faculty. |
| 1920-1940 | The Edward C. Elliott years and the emergence of a Jewish history. There were only five Jewish faculty of which the two most prominent were not openly Jewish. |
| 1940-1945 | The war period: The opening up of the sciences and mathematics, and the influx of Jewish graduate students in physics. |
| 1945-1960 | The post-war Hovde years: The integration of Jews throughout Purdue. |

Andrey Abraham Potter

In 1920, President Winthrop Stone invited Andrey Abraham Potter, a distinguished Dean of Engineering at Kansas State Agricultural College, to become Dean of Engineering at Purdue.

Potter was a remarkable man who was to become the dean of engineering deans in the country. He singlehandedly brought Purdue into prominence as an engineering institution. Potter holds the distinction of having been Purdue's first Jewish faculty member as well as its first Jewish president for, at the retirement of President Elliott in 1943, he served as acting president. In R.W. Topping's biography of Purdue, *A Century and Beyond*, Potter is described as "a Lithuanian immigrant who ... firmly believed that being a patriotic, Christian gentleman, which he was, was life's most important success." From a Jewish perspective, Potter's life is a sad one, as a closet Jew who repressed his Jewish identity for almost his entire life.

Potter's biography, *The Dean*, was written in 1974 by Robert B. Eckles while Potter was still alive and published by Purdue University. Eckles noted that he was born in Vilna, Russia in 1882, but his Jewish heritage is not mentioned. He spoke and read French, German, and Russian. He almost became a professional musician and demonstrated his musical ability during his adult life by playing the

ocarina – the “sweet potato.” As a child he was profoundly influenced by reading Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography and he vowed to go to the United States.

During his early years, a pogrom in Vilna scarred Potter emotionally and he “escaped” to the United States at the age of 15. This fact is mentioned by Eckles and is the only indirect reference to Potter’s Jewish heritage. Young Potter lived with relatives in Boston and entered MIT as a freshman in 1899, after a year of study to improve his English. With permission, he fudged his birthdate to get around the 17 year minimum age requirement for entrance. He was a brilliant, popular student, interested in music and the theater, and a budding actor. He became interested in steam turbines. Upon graduation, he worked at a GE plant in Schenectady but eventually chose academia, accepting an assistant professorship at Kansas State Agricultural College, arriving on December 31, 1904. One would like to know more about his first year at Kansas. We do know he rented a room in the home of a Presbyterian Pastor in Manhattan, made friends with the family, attended church regularly and, at a church social, met a young lady graduating in elementary education named Eva Burtner. They were married in 1906. His wife continued as a Sunday school teacher, his children were brought up as Protestants (his daughter later converted to Catholicism), and he slipped into the Gentile world. He didn’t fool anyone, much less himself. When I was a young faculty member at Purdue, my colleague, Professor Earl Honeywell, assured me that he knew Potter when he was just a Jew in Kansas.

At the end of his life, I met Potter at the John Purdue room and we had lunch together. I can’t recall what we discussed but I remember that he reminded me of my grandfather, with the same pronounced East European accent, though he was elegantly dressed. He died in 1979, at the age of 97. Potter’s life as a Marrano would have forever been a subject of speculation had it not been for a remarkable event – his reunion with his past as his life came to end. He returned to his Jewish roots and made peace with who he was. The Dean asked his physician, Dr. Ben Klatch, to take him to synagogue services and referred there to his father as Polanski. Somewhere along the line, his

name had been changed. He became close to Rabbi Gedalyah Engel, who has graciously provided his recollection, which follows

“A.A. Potter’s Jewish background was well known to the ‘initiated.’ Dean Joseph Well of the University of Florida College of Engineering, a friend from my work as Hillel Director at U of F 1947-1949, advised Marilyn and me of Potter’s Jewish background when we first came to Purdue in September 1955.

Religion is a personal matter, so I avoided embarrassing the Dean by trying to meet him on campus. However, in the Spring of 1976 when the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra came to Purdue to give its only American Bicentennial Concert in Indiana, I visited Dean Emeritus Potter in his office and asked if he would like to be a sponsor for the buffet supper-reception we had planned at Hillel.

The spry nonagenarian pulled out his wallet and gave me one hundred dollars in cash. He felt very comfortable about giving to such a secular cause.

Similarly, he was proud to be known as a Founder of the Technion in Haifa, Israel. After the Dean’s death, his daughter presented Hillel with his Technion Founder’s Plaque, which I hung on the wall of my Hillel office alongside the photo of the five Lafayette men at the 1951 groundbreaking ceremony for the Purdue Hillel Foundation building.

The two photos were a study in contrast. The group of men reacted to adversity by proudly identifying as Jews. The new building was their hope that their children could follow in their footsteps. In a free society being Jewish was not a major handicap. In America it had been possible for them to overcome economic hardship. The difficulty of maintaining personal Jewish religious identification had been more than balanced by group solidarity and love,

However, A.A. Potter, as a child in Russia, had witnessed a pogrom. For the rest of his life his goal was to

remove himself and his family from having to face such a man-made obstacle.

When Potter arrived in America in his teens, he was taken in by members of his family who lived in Boston. It was then possible for him to study at MIT. When he left for industry, he also left behind his family baggage – the stigma of being known as a Jew.

A.A. Potter was the most polite of men, a soft-spoken gentleman. Yet, during his final years when his mind would become clouded, he would quietly curse past Purdue President Edward C. Elliott for being anti-Semitic and making trouble for A.A. Potter.

To Potter his birth was a handicap, perhaps even more so than his accent. His timidity about his tainted background made him shy away from being considered for anything more than Acting President of Purdue, a position he filled between presidents.

He truly knew the bigotry of his era. At Purdue no known Jews taught when Potter arrived on campus. There was no good reason for a fund raising president to be Jewish.

It was not until the war years caused a shortage of qualified teachers that individuals were hired without regard to religious background. By then Potter had fit into the mold of trying to be a WASP. Perhaps it was the changing times that also made him feel that being a Jew in America was no longer such a severe handicap.

Once A.A. Potter became a sponsor of Zubin Mehta when he conducted Israel Philharmonic. After the concert event at Hillel, he also became a personal friend whom I visited regularly. That Fall he came to High Holiday services at Hillel. He did so for several years. Then he felt comfortable enough to attend adult High Holiday services at Sons of Abraham in Lafayette with his physician Ben Klatch.

While the Dean became more at ease with his Jewishness, he never overtly expressed regret for having raised his

children as Christians. But, when his mind clouded, he turned to his son, a retired Professor of Engineering in Florida, and said, "My son, you are Jewish."

His son, who could not tell a lie, respectfully responded, "No, Father, I am a Presbyterian." His daughter, standing nearby during this conversation, said nothing. She who had converted from Presbyterianism to Catholicism understood her father's needs.

Perhaps in the back of A.A. Potter's clouded mind was the hope that someone would still say "Kaddish" for him after his death. This never happened.

After Potter died his daughter spoke to me. Public funeral arrangements had been announced. She explained that two of his family members from Boston would be coming for the funeral the night before. She wanted to make them feel comfortable. Would I?

The night before the public church ceremony, Andrey Potter's daughter, the couple from Boston, my wife Marilyn, and I were together for a very special service at the funeral parlor. I cried for a man who was so afflicted by anti-Semitism in the land of his birth that he carried his Jewishness as a burden all the days of his life."

As early as 1921, Potter caught the eye of Purdue trustee James W. Noel as being of presidential caliber. Noel persuaded the trustees to consider Potter to succeed President Stone, who died in a mountain climbing accident. Potter declined to be considered. He did not feel it to be expedient for Purdue to have a president who was not a native and who spoke English with an accent, in light of the importance of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. In addition, he stated that Mrs. Potter was unenthusiastic about assuming the role of a president's hostess. Potter decided to remain an engineer.

Potter's influence was felt by one of Purdue's most famous engineers and, perhaps, the first professed Jew at Purdue: Maurice J. Zucrow (1899-1975). Zucrow received the first BS (cum laude) and MS in Mechanical Engineering at Harvard and was employed as a

research assistant at Purdue's Hydraulic Laboratory, which was under the jurisdiction of Civil Engineering in 1923. Potter showed an interest in Zucrow's research, invited him to dinner, and became involved in his work. Zucrow transferred to the Internal Combustion Engine Lab in Mechanical Engineering and was induced to work on a PhD under Potter. Zucrow received Purdue's first doctorate in 1928, defending his thesis before the entire Purdue faculty. He left Purdue in 1929, contributing to the research and development of rocket engines. He returned in 1946 as Professor of Gas Turbines and Jet Propulsion and eventually trained more than 90 graduate students as head of the Jet Propulsion Lab at Purdue. Zucrow served from 1959-66 as Atkins Distinguished Professor, was one of the founders of the American Rocket Society, and later received an honorary degree from Purdue.

Karl Lark-Horovitz

Another towering figure at Purdue was a man born in Vienna in 1892 as Karl Horovitz, the son of a Jewish physician. He entered the University of Vienna in 1911 and pursued studies in chemistry, physiology, physics, and pre-Socratic philosophy. He served for four years as an officer in the signal corps of the Austrian Army in World War I and was wounded. He returned to the University of Vienna and received a PhD in physics the same year.

His wife, Betty, used the name Lark, an anagram of Karl, in her professional work, and in 1926 the family name was changed to Lark-Horovitz to link his wife's professional name to his own. Later, he induced his children to drop the Horovitz.

Lark-Horovitz worked at the University of Vienna until 1925 and came to the United States on a Rockefeller International Fellowship, first to Toronto (where he met the young Isadore Walerstein), then to the University of Chicago, to the medical research lab at the Rockefeller Institute, and to Stanford. In 1928, Lark-Horovitz was invited by R.B. Moore, Dean of the School of Science (former head of Chemistry) to deliver lectures at Purdue and was persuaded to accept a permanent position in 1929. His transformation of physics from a service department to a leading scientific institution received

the support of Moore and, apparently, President Elliott, who was interested in developing science at Purdue.

Lark-Horovitz had an enormous effect on science and physics at Purdue. He was a strong, dominating figure in solid state physics but did significant research in x-ray and electron diffraction methods and early studies in experimental nuclear physics. He was a renaissance man with tremendous impatience and unbounded enthusiasm. He, like Potter, was a devoted musician, but his instrument was the violin.

Lark-Horovitz was urbane and blended into the Gentile world. He did not convert and I suspect never fully assimilated. He once told Ralph Bray that Professor Whaley, the assistant head of the department, was his liaison with the administration because "he was a goy and could get along with others." Lark-Horovitz was extremely ambitious and a difficult person. Stories about him are legend. A hay fever sufferer, he entered a Chicago hospital in the late 1950s as a result of a botched hay fever injection. A steady stream of Purdue faculty traveled to Chicago to visit him and report on research progress, for he had his finger in every detail of departmental research. The physician in charge warned him that he would get ulcers if he continued working during his convalescence. Lark responded: "I don't get ulcers. I give ulcers." He was to have a profound effect on the subsequent Jewish history of Purdue, as a direct result of his efforts to facilitate the transformation at Purdue from a teaching to a research university in basic sciences.

In the period between 1920 and 1930, however, only one other Jew joined Purdue's Physics Department. In 1929, Lark-Horovitz brought Isadore Walerstein to Purdue to found the spectroscopy laboratory. Wally, as he was known to the entire Jewish community, was its conscience. He and his wife, Lillian, were greatly involved in the life of the Jewish community. When he retired from Purdue, he emigrated to Israel, lived in Jerusalem, and helped organize an Israeli high school and undergraduate education in physics. He died in 1983.

In 1938, Lark-Horovitz persuaded the administration to hire two foreign-born applied mathematicians; one was Cornelius Lanczos, a Jew. Lanczos left Purdue after a few years for Toronto and was

to become an important figure in mathematics, spending most of his career at the Dublin Institute of Advanced Study. He died only recently. Lark-Horovitz brought a great number of well-known European refugees to campus as lecturers, visitors, or visiting professors. These included prominent Jews such as Wolfgang Pauli, Edward Teller, Hans Bethe, Otto Stern, K.F. Herzfeld, Guido Beck, Richard Courant, and Luther W. Nordheim.

Lark-Horovitz became close friends with R.B. Stewart, the powerful financial officer of Purdue, who helped him obtain funds for the department. Due to Lark-Horovitz's leadership, the department was poised for the tremendous effort required during the war years, which brought an influx of Jewish graduate students to physics.

The first two Jewish-born professors at Purdue, Potter and Lark-Horovitz, were Europeans. Both were non-practicing Jews. Both were to have an enormous impact on Purdue. They were, clearly, driven men who put their energies into their professional lives by, in a sense, escaping from their past. Their story was to be repeated at Purdue by others of Jewish heritage, who have become legends in our time. Men of great talent, some of genius – outsiders who seemed to psychologically channel their energies into achieving success in a new culture. Thorstein Veblen, in a 1919 article (*Political Science Quarterly*) explaining the intellectual pre-eminence of the Jews in modern Europe, related it as follows: Jews were half-way men, suspended in limbo between their own culture and the majority's. As such they enjoyed a degree of exemption from hard and fast preconceptions, a skeptical animus, ... a release from the dead heat of conventional finality. (From Kevles, *The Physicists*, 1971)

The only other Jewish member of Purdue's faculty was Max Steer, who came to Purdue from Iowa in 1935 to set up a program to improve the communication skills of engineers. He was to receive his PhD at Iowa, but his major professor suggested he take the Purdue job and delay his degree so that he could return to Iowa on an assistantship if things didn't work out. But things did work out; Max Steer still resides in Lafayette after 55 years, where he served as long-time head of the Department of Audiology and Speech Sciences, as the Hanley Distinguished Professor, and now as Professor Emeritus.

The Elliott Years

The years 1920-1945 are the Elliott years at Purdue, and the story of this period cannot be told without understanding this man. Elliott, born in 1874, came to Purdue from Montana, where he served as chancellor of the university system. He was neither a scientist nor a scholar but a professional administrator, a leader in public education. He became a skilled orator; his most popular subject in his early career was rating teachers.

In his biography of Potter, historian Robert. B. Eckles described Elliott as "... abrasive, abrupt, eloquently powerful with a strong rhetorical style. His executive orders were commands to hired help. The faculty and Staff members coming to see him were given short shrift unless they answered in kind [who would dare], then a give-and-take would take place." One common theory was that "(Elliott) was a very ambitious man always seeking to excel. He unconsciously resented the success of a colleague and showed it in his abruptness." The other, kinder theory was that he loved a good debate!

There are many examples of Elliott's intolerance and xenophobia. The most public was an incident brought to light in 1979 by A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., a black attorney who was a freshman at Purdue in 1944. Elliott refused to intervene in an intolerable situation when 12 black students, refused housing in Purdue dorms, complained of the freezing rooms arranged for them. Elliott was quoted as saying, "The law does not require us to allow black students in the dorm. You and your black friends must accept things as they are or leave Purdue University." Higginbotham left Purdue and, unfortunately for Elliott's reputation, became a prominent judge. The story appeared in the *Lafayette Journal and Courier* (May 13, 1979), the year Higginbotham was granted an honorary degree at Purdue.

Potter tried to have Purdue hire Carl Terzhagi, an Austrian engineer who single-handedly created soil mechanics. Elliott declined, telling Potter that "Purdue did not need any more foreigners."

When Potter became president of ASME, Elliott wrote a graceful and appropriate congratulatory note but then held up his leave.

The common conception of Elliott by the Jewish community was that he was haughty and unapproachable – at no friend to Jews

and at worst anti-Semitic. Yet, Elliott had a close contact with Lark-Horovitz and could be influenced if Lark-Horovitz persisted. In one famous story, Lark-Horovitz tramped to Elliott in 1940 requesting permission to hire young Julian Schwinger, a student of I. Rabi, who had lectured in graduate school in Columbia while an undergraduate in City College. Elliott wanted to know why Lark-Horovitz hadn't gone to Enders, Dean of Science, and Lark-Horovitz said that he didn't go through channels because Enders wouldn't hire Jews. Elliott signed and, on leaving, Lark-Horovitz ran into Enders, who inquired what he was doing at the President's office. He replied that he had come to Elliott to secure approval for an appointment that Enders wouldn't give but, if he (Enders) wanted to sign the paper now, here it was. Schwinger went on to receive an honorary degree from Purdue in 1961 and the Nobel prize in 1965.

It was difficult for Jews to get jobs in academia. Lark-Horovitz wrote Rosalyn Yallow, a student of Rabi's at Hunter College, that he would accept her as a graduate student but could not be responsible for getting her a job. She chose to switch fields and went to the University of Illinois at Urbana, where she was later a Nobel laureate.

In the early 1940s, the war brought about additional hiring of Jewish faculty in mathematics, the first hiring in chemistry, and an influx of Jewish graduate students in physics including Seymour Benzer, Ralph Bray, Arthur Ginsberg, Ernestine Rose, Paula Berger (later Feuer), Harry Rosenberg, and Erwin Hahn, as well as a new instructor soon to be Annie Akeley. A pipeline from Brooklyn College to Purdue was opened by Seymour Benzer. (After working on transistors, Benzer changed fields and became a leading light in phage genetics and the fine structure of the gene.) In 1942, Jennie Rosenthal, a physicist at Columbia, discouraged Ralph Bray from considering Purdue as a graduate student, remarking that Purdue was known to be anti-Semitic and that he would be better off at Notre Dame. When Benzer was hired as an assistant professor in 1945-46, Professor Edward Akeley thought it would be the last Jewish appointment for a long time. Whatever the true story of Elliott, it is known that when Frederick Hovde

came to Purdue, the situation changed dramatically if not irrevocably. Jews were hired throughout the university as the faculty increased to accommodate the tremendous influx of returning GIs as students. American universities and Purdue truly entered a new era.

There were still to be problems for Jews at Purdue, particularly in the late 1950s when Purdue's approach to the legislative demand to decrease the number of out-of-state students was to stop recruiting students from New York City and New Jersey. Jewish enrollment declined precipitously. This little-known story involving President Hovde, Rabbi Engel, and the Board of Trustees should be a topic for a future chapter on the Jewish history of Purdue.

Let me end this brief history with some observations and conclusions.

1) The reluctance of Purdue to hire Jewish faculty in the 1930s was a great loss. This was the time that world-class scholars and scientists, refugees from Europe, were available for a song. Purdue did not respond to this opportunity and missed out on a generation of scholars that could have had a great impact on Purdue's stature. It could be argued that times were hard in the 1930s. Nevertheless, Purdue always found the funds when it wanted to through David Ross and others when it felt it was in its interest. For example, many thousands of dollars were garnered to make a splash with Amelia Earhart.

2) The history of Jews at Purdue during the war years needs to be researched and remembered. This talented group played an important role in the history of the Departments of Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics.

3) The increasing tolerance at Purdue and other universities must be emphasized. The past was not always glorious. Nostalgia often overlooks injustice. Jews, despite their pre-eminence, had a difficult time getting hired at Purdue prior to 1945. There are other groups whose stories at Purdue should be told: Asians, African-Americans, and women. We must make sure the University continues to judge men and women by their character and contribution rather than their color or creed.

References

- Burrin, Frank K. 1970. Edward Charles Elliott, Educator. Purdue University Studies, Lafayette, Indiana.
- Eckles, Robert B. 1974. The Dean. Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.
- Johnson, V.A. Karl Lark-Horovitz. Pergamon Press, New York.
- Kevles, Daniel J. 1979. The Physicists. Vintage Books, New York.
- Topping, Robert W. 1988. A Century and Beyond. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana.
- Topping, Robert W. 1980. The Hovde Years. Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

Andrey Abraham Potter: The Man for All Reasons

By: Harry H. Hirschl

A few years ago, I traveled to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico to escape the Indiana winter. There I connected with the Jewish community by attending the Saturday morning Torah study and worship service. I joined other "snow birds," primarily from the East Coast, to form a congregation of fifty or sixty each Shabbat. Our opening ritual was to sit down and announce, "I'm Harry Hirschl from Lafayette, Indiana." One Saturday, the couple sitting next to me was Grace and Irwin Lebow from Washington, D.C. When Grace heard, "Lafayette, Indiana" she said, "My great uncle was Dean of Engineering at Purdue." I responded, "You mean Dean Potter?" When she said, "Yes," I was flabbergasted, this was more Jewish geography than I ever expected in a hundred years!

Later over dinner, I heard more about "Uncle Andrey." I knew Dean Potter slightly during my years at Purdue University, 1944 to 1947, as an undergraduate student studying engineering. He gave freshmen lectures about the role of engineers in society, starting with, "We must learn zee mother language," spoken with a thick European accent. Potter reminded us that engineers must become good citizens of the world and develop interests outside our professional activities besides being able to apply scientific knowledge to engineering processes. I also recall eating dinner with him in the residence hall I lived in. When I told him I came from Missouri, he said, "Missouri made a big mistake in funding two schools of engineering, one at the University of Missouri in Columbia and the other in Rolla, the School of Mines. Missouri doesn't have enough money to have two good schools. You made the right decision to come to Purdue instead of going to a Missouri engineering school." I was impressed with

Dean Potter, a physically short man with a large nose, perfectly dressed, yet at ease in the company of students at a dining table. I have a long-standing emotional attachment to Purdue, but am very much aware of its dark side (biased administrators), as well as its long and distinguished attainments. Robert W. Topping has written *A Century and Beyond* and *The Howde Years* describing these achievements. Robert B. Eckles wrote *The Dean*, a biography of Dean A.A. Potter; from this book I read what a great man he was.

Purdue University was founded in 1869, and arrived at its current status as a world class institution of higher education through the efforts of many outstanding men and women. Dean Potter, of blessed memory, was one of those all-time "greats," very possibly the greatest. He was an outstanding teacher, both of undergraduate and graduate students, a brilliant researcher in heat-power, an administrator of sound judgement, and a distinguished executive; he did it all. Eckles book has recorded his academic and management achievements; I will summarize a few highlights from that book.

Dean Potter was born in 1882, and came to this country at the age of 15. He spent time learning English, then entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a freshman in 1899. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering with honors in 1903, then started his career at the General Electric plant in Schenectady, New York. In 1905, he switched to academia and was appointed Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. Eight years later, he was appointed Dean of Engineering. In 1920, the president of Purdue University presented his name to the Board of Trustees, and he was appointed Dean of Engineering. He served as Dean at Purdue for 33 years, where two buildings were named in his honor, the Andrey A. Potter Building at the Calumet Campus in Hammond, Indiana and the A. A. Potter Engineering Center on the Lafayette campus (no other individual has been so recognized with two buildings) and a life-size portrait now hangs in the Elliott Hall of Music. Nationally he was awarded ten honorary degrees and was president of the American Society of Mechanical Engineering and the American Society for Engineering Education, both very prestigious positions.

As I read Eckles' book I noted one glaring omission: Dean Potter was a Jew, born in Vilna, then Russia now Lithuania, to Gregor & Riva Potter. Gregor was of Dutch descent while Riva was Russian. But not one word of his Jewish background is to be found in the book. In his study, *A Jewish History of Purdue 1920-1940*, Prof. Jules Janick wrote, "Potter holds the distinction of having been Purdue's first Jewish faculty member as well as its first Jewish president..." Obviously Dean Potter did not tell Eckles about his Jewish background; "Why" I asked myself. To me the answer is simple: Purdue, and the United States, were overtly anti-Semitic for many years especially during his tenure. To some extent this prejudice has changed since World War II, but there are still undercurrents to this very day.

When Potter moved to Manhattan, Kansas, the home of Kansas State University, he rented a room from the Presbyterian minister and "regularly attended services at his church." He met Eva Burtner, the daughter of the minister, at a church social gathering and soon married her. After moving to Lafayette, Indiana, he became a prominent member of Central Presbyterian Church here.

Now I want to tell the untold stories about Dean Potter, starting with those told by great nieces, Grace Lebow and her sister, Ruth Zirin; from my interviews with several people that knew him here in Lafayette; and from documents sent to me by his close friend, J. Dayton McCormick, the minister of the Central Presbyterian Church from 1947 to 1974.

Grace and Ruth told about Dean Potter's financial support and deep affection for his Jewish family in Boston. "Uncle Andrey" came to this country hoping to become an inventor, inspired by reading a biography of Thomas Edison. He told Grace that in Russia he had some wish to become a rabbi, bringing with him a *kippah* (skull cap) and *tallit* (prayer shawl) but soon learned that the profession was not a realistic possibility. When he arrived in Boston, he lived with Uncle Nathan Pelonsky who told him that religion was for Europe; he was now on his way to becoming an American citizen and Americans were either business men or professionals – doctors, lawyers, engineers or professors – not rabbis. Forget religion and become an American was Uncle Nathan's advice. While Uncle Andrey did not regard Uncle

Nathan very highly, he greatly appreciated Uncle Nathan giving him room and board. Following Uncle Nathan's advice, he put away his *kippah* and *tallit*. Uncle Andrey showed his gratitude in a very tangible way through his lifelong dedication to and support of Uncle Nathan's four children: Lillian, Anna, Fred and Selma.

Uncle Andrey remained attached to his Jewish Boston family throughout his life and traveled there frequently to visit his mother, Riva his sister, Olga; and her daughter, Sonya (Grace's mother) as well as Uncle Nathan's family. Both Olga and Riva lived with Grace in her parents' home at various times. And in her later years, after Grace's mother's death, Grandma Olga came to live with the Lebows. Uncle Andrey continued to visit and to help financially with his sister's care until her death at age 92. Andrey's arrival in Boston always included a meal with his mother's prize pickled tongue. After she died there was no one living that knew the recipe, so the family had to explain to Andrey that they could no longer treat him with what they thought was his favorite delicacy. He responded, "That's OK, I never liked tongue anyway."

When his grandniece and nephews were studying to become Bat and Bar Mitzvah, Dean Potter wrote them letters in Hebrew to further their studies. He was a serious student of languages, fluent in French, German, and Russian in addition to English. After Grace's son William's bar mitzvah, Andrey gave him his long unused *tallit* – a possession highly prized by William. It was on that occasion that Andrey told Grace about his religious views and his early attachment to Judaism. He told the family that he attended Presbyterian services but never accepted Jesus. A big family discussion arose when Andrey became a 33rd degree Mason (an honorary degree conferred only on outstanding Masons). What was going on? Did the 33rd degree ritual him to accept Jesus Christ to become a Christian? The family never did find out, for the secrecy of the degree precluded their knowing about this detail. From my own experience, for I am a convert from Christianity to Judaism and my family had great difficulty accepting my change, this discussion involved tension and uncertainty about the relationship of Andrey with his Boston family.

He was very generous towards his family, sending money each month to a relative in Vilna; helping pay for his mother's and sister's passage to America (his father died in Lithuania) and giving money for the family's living expenses. During the Depression he sent \$50 each month, an amount that "kept the family going for many years," as reported by Donald Hackel, a brother of Grace Lebow. On a personal level, he was quite frugal. When Andrey started to work for the General Electric Company, he went to Filene's Basement in Boston and bought a suit that he wore until it was threadbare. He waited for his next visit to the family and made another trip to Filene's Basement to buy another. During his years at Purdue, he was a fastidious dresser wearing carefully tailored suits, beautiful ties, etc. He was careful with money nonetheless. For example, on one trip to Boston, he insisted on buying Grace a canary as a gift. He invited her to walk to the store with him, about a three-mile trip. After the purchase, Grace expected to take the street car home along Beacon Street and said she could not carry the cage all the way back. Andrey understood, reached in his pocket, gave her a dime for the streetcar fare, and walked back by himself. Dimes were not to be wasted on frivolous things like streetcars when you could walk!

Uncle Andrey also financed college for his grandnieces and grandnephews: Donald Hackel at Harvard College and Harvard Medical School, Ruth Hackel Zirin at Simmons College, and Allan Hackel at Northeastern University (Andrey was particularly pleased about this choice since it was a land grant university like Purdue). He gave money to help Grace Hackel Lebow finance her education to Tufts University and later, Simmons College. He did not neglect the education of his children; son James earned a Ph.D. in physics from Princeton and daughter Helen a Ph.D. in economics from Johns Hopkins University.

After he retired as Dean at Purdue, Potter enjoyed a lucrative consulting business. His fee was \$1,000/day, a handsome sum in the 1950s. One day after consulting with the Air Preheater Company, Wellesville, New York, he stopped to see his sister in Boston. There he endorsed the \$1,000 consulting check over to his sister, saying, "Here, you keep this check for a rainy day. You never know when this money will come in handy."

The fascinating part of this story is how Dean Potter, Uncle Andrey, held within himself membership in a Christian church and recognition of his Jewish background. In his story of Purdue, *A Century and Beyond*, Robert Topping wrote, "In 1920 (Dean) Benjamin resigned, (President) Stone found his successor in the remarkable man who served as dean of engineering thirty-three years, turned Purdue into one of America's truly prestigious engineering and scientific education. He was Andrey Abraham Potter, the Lithuanian immigrant who played the ocarina, venerated Benjamin Franklin, and firmly believed that being patriotic and a *Christian gentleman*, which he was were life's most important successes." How this fits with the Lithuanian immigrant arriving with a *kippah* and *tallit* is a mystery we will never know.

The end of Dean Potter's life reflects his enigma. He died on Monday, November 5, 1979. His daughter, Helen, called Boston relatives Irene and Donald Hackel and arranged a Jewish service at Potter's request, on Thursday, November 8th. Potter's body was clothed in a shroud, a Jewish custom, and Rabbi Gedaliah Engel, director of the Hillel Foundation at Purdue, recited the Hebrew prayers before the closed casket in the funeral home. Then on Friday, November 9th, a graveside service was held at 10 o'clock at the Grand View Cemetery in West Lafayette, the Rev. H. Kenneth McCullen, minister of Central Presbyterian Church, officiating. One of those attending, Dick Grace, said it was a rainy dreary day and the water went over his shoe tops. It was almost as if God were a mourner, crying at the loss of this great man. At 4 o'clock, a memorial service was held at Central Presbyterian Church with speeches by Father Leo Haigerty, pastor of the students' Catholic church, St. Thomas Aquinas; the Rev. McMullen; and Arthur Hansen President of Purdue University.

In these stories, we see a *mensch* (Yiddish), a *maasim tovim* (Hebrew), a man to admire, respect and emulate – words expressing the highest accolade in Judaism. Dean Potter, Uncle Andrey, was such a man as well as being "a Christian gentleman."

Here are the other stories I have gathered:

From Bill LeBold

Potter came to the US on a cattle boat; he bargained with the owners for his ticket: he would entertain the crew by playing his ocarina and leading them in song if the owner gave him free passage. The owner accepted the offer.

When a Russian delegation came to this country during the early days of the "thaw" in the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union, Potter was asked to meet with the group because he spoke fluent Russian. When he met them, he asked, "Do you still sing 'the old songs'?" The Russian said yes, Potter took out his ocarina and led them in song. Potter met a young man working on the Canadian railroad and was impressed with his ability. The man asked if he could come to Purdue, Potter said yes, but the University would not admit him because he did not have a high school diploma. Potter went to the president to plead his case; President Elliott said "No"; then Potter said, "I will give you my letter of resignation that you can accept if he doesn't graduate." Elliott accepted the offer; the man enrolled and did graduate. He then went on to become the president of the Canadian National Railroad.

During the worst times of the Depression, Potter traveled around the country representing the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and heard how discouraged the faculty and students were in the colleges and universities. He decided he would like to make a tour, tell them that the current situation would change for the better and explain that good times were ahead. Potter was optimistic, knew times would improve and wanted to encourage his colleagues with an uplifting speech. He went to President Elliott to ask his permission, and Elliott turned him down cold, saying that was not Potter's job. Potter argued that it was; Elliott said he couldn't stop him, but Purdue would not reimburse him for his travel expenses. Potter immediately went to the Lafayette National Bank, borrowed the money and made the trip. Thereafter he never applied for any reimbursement of his Purdue travels.

After his retirement, Potter gave a \$100,000 to Purdue, saying that this sum represents all the salary money he had been paid in his thirty years as an employee.

After Potter became too infirm to travel by himself, the university asked Bill LeBold to accompany him. Richard Grosh, dean of engineering after Potter's tenure, was appointed president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Potter was invited to attend the inaugural and LeBold accompanied him to Troy, NY. They stayed in a hotel, and on the day of the inaugural, LeBold woke up to find Potter's bed empty. LeBold searched everywhere and could not find Dean Potter. He put out a call to the police who found Potter in downtown Troy buying gifts for the Grosh children; he was very attracted to Dick Grosh and his family and wanted to show his affection.

From Dick and Connie Grace

Potter had a fondness for children. About 5:15pm, Connie and her sister Ginnie would walk to the corner of 5th and Waldron Street to great Dean Potter. He would pat them on the head and say "How are my two 'leedil' girls today?"

On Halloween, Connie and Ginnie would be dressed up in costumes and their parents, John and Virginia Fotos, would take them to the Potters. The dean would come out and pretend he didn't know who the "leedil" girls were.

Dean Potter knew the Grace's children, Virginia & Rick. One day he gave them each a copy of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. He also asked if they would like a Lincoln Medallion. Their expectations were very high, but each was given a penny, "a Lincoln Medallion." A penny – they couldn't believe it.

Dean Potter was a past president of the American Society for Engineering Education and attended the annual meetings. At the time the annual meeting was held at the US Naval Academy, Dick & Connie Grace took their children. Their daughter, Virginia, was about 16, and she asked Dean Potter if he could arrange for her to dance with a midshipman. Many families took their daughters, all expecting the "date" and midshipman, but only three showed up.

These three middies were kept busy dancing all night with all the young women.

Dick Grace asked Dean Potter his secret for living such a long life (he died at 97). He responded with three things: his ancestors lived a long life, he ate only well done meat, and he drank very small amounts of alcohol.

Potter and Thomas Edison were good friends. Edison was very deaf and had an ear trumpet horn piece. Potter had to yell into the gizmo but doubted that Edison ever heard a word Potter said.

Henry Ford invited Dean Potter to consult with him in Detroit. After spending a day or two with Ford, Potter was ready to leave and asked about his consulting fee. Ford said there would be no fee. When reporting this transaction to Dick Grace, Potter swore – the first time Dick ever heard those words. The memory of the transaction was still fresh in Potter's mind forty years after the event.

Dick and Dean Potter were traveling to a Lafayette Rotary meeting, but had to stop at a faculty member's home for an errand. A very over-weight teenage daughter came out with her father. Always praising, Dean Potter said, "My she has a lovely Germanic figure."

Dean Potter attended many Rotary meetings and had to be helped in and out of the car in his later years. His daughter Helen warned about Potter's difficulty of keeping his pants above his waist; one day as he walked into the meeting, his pants fell down to his ankles. His companions stopped, yanked his pants up over his stomach, tightened his belt and proceeded into the meeting.

When Dean Potter was asked to be Acting President between the retirement of Edward Elliott and the arrival of Fred Hovde, David Ross was president of the Board of Trustees. Ross made the offer to Potter, which included a \$500 salary increase. After Hovde took office, David Ross went back to Potter, said the \$500 was non-recurring, and reduced Potter's salary back to the previous level. When Potter told this story to Dick Grace, Potter swore at Ross – the second and last time.

Gala week was one of the Purdue traditions Potter attended each spring after his retirement. It gave him the opportunity to renew acquaintances. He knew many people by name, years after they were

graduated. He would go from table to table to greet his friends and give a five-minute speech about the triumphs of the Land Grant Universities. He gave the same speech at each table, each year, repeating the entire procedure for about ten years.

From Ray Cohen

Maurice Zucrow was granted the first Purdue Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering. Dean Potter recruited Zucrow and they became fast friends. After arriving here, Zucrow married a local woman and they soon has a baby. A few months after the baby's arrival, Dean and Mrs. Potter called on the proud parents. The baby was sitting on the floor playing with a large rubber ball. Dean Potter immediately got down on his hands and knees and rolled the ball back and forth with the baby – who was without a diaper. Imagine a dean playing with a bare-bottom baby; the mother was mortified!

Dean Potter set a high standard of dress on the Purdue campus: carefully tailored suit, starched white shirt, handsome tie, and carefully polished shoes. One faculty member that tried to follow that standard was an engineering professor, William Fontaine. One day Potter was strolling across the campus and met Fontaine; he took one look at his attire and said, "Professor Fontaine your coat must match your pants." Fontaine was were a sport coat and slacks. Some years later, Potter attended a meeting in a checked sport coat, gray slacks and a loud tie; an engineering faculty member asked him why his jacket didn't match his pants. Potter's response, "times change."

From Members of Central Presbyterian Church

For many years, Dean Potter would walk from his home to the church each Sunday, a trip about four miles.

His presence at the church was very impressive – perfectly dressed in a suit with a white shirt and tie. One of the women members said he scared her to death with his appearance and sedate manner.

Many church members found Potter pleasant to talk to, very charming and he knew almost every member by name, greeting them in a very friendly way.

Dean Potter was known as the "go to guy," the man who would see the things got done or do them himself. He was also an Elder, a member of the board of trustees, the governing body of the congregation, thus a much respected member.

A member's husband was on the faculty of the Electrical Engineering school. When the husband was promoted to full professor, Dean Potter wrote a congratulatory letter which the wife and husband never forgot.

From Father Leo Haigerty

Dean Potter's daughter Helen, who was a member of the Catholic church, moved back to West Lafayette, Indiana after the Dean's wife died and regularly attended Mass. From time to time, the Dean would attend Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas with Helen. Father Leo Haigerty, an engineering graduate of Purdue and friend of Potter, greeted Dean Potter after services one Sunday and said how glad he was to see him. Potter said, "I'm always glad to be in the company of people that believe in God."

From the Rev. Dr. J. Dayton McCormick, minister at Central Presbyterian Church

To express his opinion of Dean Potter, Dr. McCormick sent an article about a dean at Princeton University, Henry Burchard Fine, with the comment, "my opinion of Dean Potter." The article was highlighted with the following: "(Dean Fine) was a man of noble character, wide culture, deep experience, eminent ability in his special branch, a successful and faithful teacher, a wise counselor in committees, and when call to administrative office, discreet, firm and courageous. He was devoted to intellectual interest, made them prominent in daily intercourse, and obliged even frivolous or underdeveloped minds to bow down to them. In science, philosophy, history, politics, and literature he was well read and his opinion carried weight. He has been a tower of strength in the faculty, never captious or contentious, never selfishly ambitious, always reasonable, sane, temperate, preserving an exact balance between severity and good nature.

He had so much practical sense, so much knowledge of men, and so much sympathy with human weakness that he could rebuke without offending. Nothing in his appearance told of the afflictions he had endured, as nothing in his behavior revealed the honors that had been bestowed upon him. Pride, ambition, anxiety, the cares of office, and even grief itself had made no marks on his noble and serene countenance..”

Dr. McCormick explained that biblically that Dean is described in Psalm 15:

“Lord, who may sojourn in your tent, who may dwell in your holy mountain? He who lives without blame, who does what I right, and in his heart acknowledges the truth; whose tongue is not given to evil; who has never done harm to his fellow, or borne reproach for his acts toward his neighbor; for whom a contemptible man is abhorrent, but who honors those who fear the Lord; who stands by his oath even to his hurt, who never lent money at interest, or accepted a bribe against the innocent. The man who acts thus shall never be shaken.”

The following individuals provided the stories about Dean Potter:

- Raymond Cohen, Purdue Professor of Mechanical Engineering
- Connie Fotos Grace, as a small child, a neighbor of Dean Potter
- Richard Grace, Purdue Professor of Metallurgical Engineering
- Mary Hesselberth, wife of a Purdue Professor of Electrical Engineering, member of Central Presbyterian Church
- Catherine Hostetter, member of Central Presbyterian Church
- William LeBold, Purdue Professor of Engineering
- Grace Lebow, grandniece of Dean Potter
- Ruth Michaud, member of Central Presbyterian Church
- Carolyn Risk, member of Central Presbyterian Church
- Maxine Swezey, member of Central Presbyterian Church
- Ruth Zirin, sister of Grace Lebow, great-niece of Dean Potter